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DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 927 EA 020 495

AUTHOR Elmore, Richard F.
TITLE Contested Terrain: The Next Generation of Educational Reform.
SPONS AGENCY Association of California School Administrators.
PUB DATE Jan 88
NOTE 24p.; Report prepared for the Commission on Public School Administration and Leadership.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Assessment; *Educational Change; *Educational Improvement; Educational Policy; Educational Quality; Educational Technology; Elementary Secondary Education; Instructional Improvement; *Public Schools; School Choice; School Community Relationship; *School Effectiveness; Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS Association of California School Administrators

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to assess the present instructional program of public education and to present recommendations for changing schools that will enhance the effectiveness of instruction. The midsixties to the late seventies are described as periods of equity and reform in the areas of rights and entitlements. Beginning in the late seventies, a shift in educational policy resulted in the current generation of reforms centering around quality, productivity, efficiency, and performance. The document speculates about the themes of the next generation in the areas of changing patterns of society, community and family; the lack of engagement in learning; and the professionalism of teaching. The focus then shifts to the central problem of school effectiveness, which is the constructing of various domains of authority and responsibility under which teachers and students operate. The domains discussed are the classroom, the school, the school within the school system, and the school system and their communities. Finally, five radical proposals that educators might pursue are outlined: (1) dramatic reductions in the scale of schools; (2) choice of the technology of instruction residing with the school; (3) choice of internal organization residing with the school; (4) choice of school by clients and educators; and (5) creation of policy "free zones" in which whole sets of existing regulations are waived for specific settings on conditions of performance. Appended are 10 references. (SI)

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ED300927

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The Next Generation of Educational Reform

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January 1988

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Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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Contested Terrain: [1]

The Next Generation of Educational Reform

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My charge is to assess the present instructional program of public education and to present recommendations for changing schools that will enhance the effectiveness of instruction. A few caveats are in order: First, there is no single "instructional program," per se, in public education, but rather a complex array of opportunities for learning which differ considerably from one setting to another. However much we might hope the situation were otherwise, the education a child receives is a function of the formal curriculum, which can be more or less standard from one setting to another, the actual curriculum, which is a product of the formal curriculum, the resources of the setting, and the skills, knowledge, and predispositions of teachers, and the bundle of attributes that the child brings to the curriculum. As we've known at least since Socrates, learning is dialogue, and different teachers and students bring different things to the conversation.

Second, there is an enormously rich body of scholarship about the effects of instruction on various types of students, which, not surprisingly, yields no simple assessments of the relationship between particular instructional practices, student attributes, and effects of various kinds. If there is a simple lesson from this literature, in my view, it is, "that which is done well works." That is, almost any explicit instructional strategy, which includes

a thoughtful, empirically-based formulation of how students learn, what they need to know, and what kind of instruction is likely to get them there, will "work," in the sense of achieving its intended objectives, if it is employed by an educator with subject matter knowledge, pedagogical skill, and a sensitivity to students. Arguments about the merits and effects of various instructional practices are important to the professional lives of teachers and researchers, and I don't want to demean those arguments. Quite the contrary, they should be encouraged and nurtured, and they should be brought explicitly into schools. But it is far more important to have thoughtful, skilled, and reflective people doing what they judge to be best than it is to have everyone doing the same thing-- some well, some in mediocre and uninspired ways, and many poorly.

With these caveats in mind, the kernel of my argument is as follows: Instructional effectiveness is best encouraged not by finding out "what works" and telling people in schools how to do it, but by creating schools in which teachers and students are expected as a condition of their work to take repsonsibility for their learning and to act on their knowledge. Recent attempts at educational reform-- over the past twenty years or so-- have failed to create these conditions. These reforms, while well-intentioned, have increasingly removed responsibility for learning from the place where it has to reside if instruction is to be effective-- with students and teachers-- and increasingly placed this responsibility in the hands third parties-- administrators, educational experts, and policymakers. Reforms, if they are to

improve the effectiveness of schools, will have to reverse this erosion of responsibility.

I will first sketch the dimensions of two recent generations of educational reform and speculate about the dimensions of the next generation. I will then focus on what I regard as the central problem of school effectiveness-- constructing the various domains of authority and responsibility under which teachers and students operate. Finally, I will outline five radical proposals that educators might pursue if they were serious about focusing responsibility for learning with teachers and students.

Educational Reform

Current discussions of educational reform occur in a context shaped by earlier attempts at reform. A comprehensive discussion of this context would begin with the creation of the common school in the early nineteenth century and trace the effects of successive attempts at reform through the progressive period to the present. Others have done this better than I can do in this space. [2] For purposes of discussion, then, let me make a few selective observations about the two most recent periods of educational reform as a preface to some speculations about the next period.

From the mid 'sixties to the late 'seventies, the major theme of education reform was equity. The rhetoric of this period of reform was rights and entitlements. The policy instruments used by reformers were categorical programs and regulations. The targets of reform were specific populations of students-- the educationally disadvantaged, the handicapped, children in racially isolated

schools-- who were thought to need special or remedial treatment. The objective of reform was, at a minimum, to insure that incremental resources were focused on these populations, and beyond that, to close the gap in achievement and opportunity between these children and their more privileged peers. The primary source of policy initiatives in this period was the federal government, although some states-- notably California-- anticipated and augmented federal initiatives.

The main effects of this generation of reforms were: (1) to draw attention to disparities in opportunities for learning and their correlation with race and socio-economic status; (2) to graft onto existing school structures an array of supplemental programs meant to remedy these disparities; and (3) to reinforce the responsibility of educators to provide for the learning of students with a wide variety of backgrounds and needs.

Beginning in the late 'seventies, there was an appreciable shift in educational policy which resulted in the current generation of reforms. The rhetoric of this generation is quality, productivity, efficiency, and performance. The main policy instruments are standards-- increased course requirements, for example-- and assessment and monitoring devices-- teacher competency tests, student achievement tests, and the like. The targets of reform are, at least nominally, all students. The objective is to improve the overall quality and performance of the educational system, although it is unclear whether this means raising average achievement, narrowing the gap between the highest and lowest,

enhancing the performance of the most able students, or all of the above. The primary source of policy initiatives in this period has been states. California's SB 813 is among the most comprehensive of state reforms during this period.

The main effects of this generation of reforms seem to be: (1) to draw attention to the nature and gross quantity of schooling in basic academic subjects available to all students; (2) to focus on whole schools as the unit of analysis and intervention, rather than on incremental programs for special populations of students; and (3) to reinforce the responsibility of educators to teach some basic common core of knowledge to all students with some demonstrable effect.

Throughout these two generations of reforms-- and for several generations of reform before that-- certain dominant patterns of schooling have remained relatively impervious to change: Subject matter has been divided into discrete units and alloated to specific parcels of time; teaching has been conceived as telling, learning as the accumulation of facts, and knowledge as the ability to restate what is taught; teachers' work has been thought of almost exclusively as interaction with students, not the creation of knowledge; and both teachers and students are thought of as mastering knowledge from external sources-- textbooks, curriculum packages, test items, etc. [3] Furthermore, the essential bureaucratic form of local public schooling has also remained impervious to change. Established in the progressive era, this form is characterized by a lay board with formal oversight

responsibility, a significant central administration with authority over most resource allocation decisions, and an administrative hierarchy in which the practice of teaching is subordinate to several layers of school and district level administration. Exceptions to these dominant patterns of schooling have occurred in isolated cases, but these exceptions have never appreciably altered the dominant patterns.

The contours of the next generation of educational reform are not yet clear, but some themes have begun to emerge. The first of these themes is a concern for the changing patterns of society, community, and family around schools. The traditional two-parent, single wage-earner family will soon be the living arrangement for a minority of children. The proportion of children living in poor, single, female-headed households is increasing dramatically. A significant proportion of young adult minority males will continue their chronic, long-term disengagement from school and work, leaving them ill-equipped to play a role in the economic support of families. [4] These changes in the environment of public schooling will mean that an increasing proportion of children will bring more problems to school, and that schools will be under pressure to increase the range of services they offer. These changes also hit public education in one its weakest, most vulnerable places-- its ability to retain and motivate students. While school retention is much greater now than it was fifty or one hundred years ago, retention has not improved significantly in the last forty years. Something like one-quarter of those who enter the ninth grade fail

to complete the twelfth, and in many urban areas the proportion is more like one-half to two-thirds. Those with the greatest risk of dropping out of school at present-- minority, low-achievers-- are the very population that will be increasing as a proportion of total school enrollment in the future.

Scholars like James Coleman see these recent changes as part of a longer historical trend in which the economic, educational, and moral authority of the family has been eroded by impersonal institutions-- notably, the coporation, the state, and public education-- reducing the "social capital" available to enhance the quality of children's lives and opportunities for learning and moral development. Coleman suggests the development of new institutions-- as yet unspecified-- which would supplement the social capital of children. [5]

A second theme likely to arise in the new reform agenda, closely related to the first, is the lack of engagement in learning, by both teachers and students, engendered by schools as the are presently constituted. Close observers of instruction in public schools, especially at the secondary level, find a generally depressing and demoralizing landscape, which accords with my earlier characterization of dominant modes of instructional practice. Even in the so-called "best" public schools, teachers spend most of the time talking, and students listening, content is delivered straight from the text with little attempt to engage students in the broader sources of knowledge beyond the text and the classroom, students demonstrate mastery by regurgitating facts

at regular intervals, and the rewards go to those who manifest the greatest tolerance for mind-numbing routine. Furthermore the evidence is strong that teachers and students strike rather explicit "bargains" or "treaties," in which teachers agree to hold their expectations for students' effort, inquisitiveness, and engagement to a minimum in return for minimum demands by students on teachers' time and emotional resources. [6]

This phenomenon of disengagement, bargains, and treaties, it is important to note, can occur at any level of standards. That is, so-called "high standards," in the form of tighter curriculum requirements and more frequent testing, do nothing by themselves to foster greater engagement in learning by teachers and students, since standards in this form are external to both parties. Higher standards simply increase the outside expectations that apply to how many discrete bits of information will be presented in a given time period. Standards do nothing to change teaching from the presentation of material to something more interesting or demanding. Indeed, by increasing the load of material to be delivered in a given time period, higher content standards may introduce strong incentives to make teaching even less imaginative and engaging and learning even more a matter of rote accumulation of facts. Anyone who has taken organic chemistry at the collegiate level-- or any other course designed to weed out less qualified students before advancement to the next level-- has seen how bad pedagogy, often intentionally deployed in the name of high standards, can destroy any semblance of engagement in learning.

Content standards themselves do nothing to make the engagement of students and teachers with academic content either more likely or more rewarding, and indeed may discourage such engagement if the requirements are seen as unreasonable. Demands for increased academic content in schools are occurring at precisely the time when public schools are, for the most part, failing to achieve active engagement in academic learning and are facing a clientele whose "social capital," to use Coleman's term, does not augment or reinforce that engagement.

A third theme likely to arise in the next generation of reform is the professionalization of teaching and the reexamination of schools as workplaces. Whether or not a "teacher shortage" is in the offing, elementary and secondary education is likely to face severe problems, as it always has in tight labor markets, competing for highly skilled talent. Competitive salaries are part of the problem, but probably not the most serious part. Schools as they are presently organized and administered are, ironically, unlikely to attract or retain people with strong ideas about teaching and the skills to implement them, since schools as organizations have little or no way to provide recognition, autonomy, access to discretionary resources, and access to professional networks for people who distinguish themselves as teachers. The main route to recognition and distinction in schools is to become an administrator, first at the building level and later at the district level. The dominant bureaucratic structure of public education, noted above, delivers a strong message to its personnel:

If you want to acquire the trappings of other professional occupations in society, including discretion in the management of your time, influence over the resources necessary to do your job well, and access to new knowledge from interaction with peers, you must either become an administrator or leave education altogether.[7]

Public schools, it is important to note, will probably not face a major "teacher shortage," except in certain important, highly specialized areas, like multi-lingual teachers. Public schools have historically always found ways to put adults in classrooms with children at some prescribed ratio; standards of entry to teaching have proven very elastic in response to fluctuations in the supply and demand for teachers. The labor supply and organizational problems confronting public education are far more complex and subtle than the label "teacher shortage" implies. The main problem is how to construct occupational and organizational structures that will attract and retain the kind of people who can teach what society expects public school students to learn, and to do it in a way that inspires commitment to and engagement in further learning. Existing public school bureaucracy will not attract and retain people with a strong interest in more complex and vareigated forms of teaching and learning-- either for hard-to-teach or for talented students-- because the system is, for the most part, designed to produce a standard kind of learning for a modal clientele. New and more complex forms of teaching and learning, if they occur at all, will occur either in "hot house" settings with little or no connection to mainstream public schools,

or in some radically revised structure of public schools. The issue is whether policymakers and educators are willing to make the kind of changes in public school structure that are required to implement more demanding models of teaching and learning.

It should be clear by now that I am not optimistic about the ability of educators and policymakers to grapple with the demands of the new generation of reform. Previous reforms, while they have had constructive effects, have not faced the central problems of public schooling: how to change dominant modes of instruction that discourage engagement and how to change a bureaucratic structure that discourages people with a strong professional interest in teaching and learning. But I think the three themes of the next generation of reform-- an increasing proportion of hard-to-reach students, increasing attention to problems of engagement in teaching and learning, and increasing attention to problems attracting and retaining educators with a serious interest in teaching and learning-- constitute reason enough to confront durable and established patters of schooling.

Contested Terrain: Four Domains of Authority

If the next generation of reform is to make serious progress on these issues, it must address four domains of authority: within the classroom, within schools, within school systems, and between school systems and their communities. I use the term "contested terrain" to describe these domains, first, because I think it is problematical whether we will emerge from the next generation of educational reform with a resolution of the problems of authority

in these four domains sufficient to sustain public education, and second, competing interests need to be reconciled at each level in order to make progress.

In the first domain, the classroom, the issue is whether adults can sustain enough authority with students to produce engagement in learning. I have written about this issue in other places, and others have written about it too. [8] Authority in all democratic societies is a function of consent, so the issue within classrooms is the degree to which teachers can acquire the resources, knowledge, skills, and predispositions to elicit consenting engagement from students. As the literature on engagement in secondary schools suggests, this is an extraordinary task which is not being performed particularly well in existing schools.

In the second domain, the school, the issue is how to create a form of organization that rewards competence in the central task of schools-- teaching and learning. The current structure of schools does not do that, since it provides status and autonomy primarily to those who escape from teaching into administration or other non-educational occupations, and it rewards students mainly on the basis of acquisition of facts rather than mastery of learning skills. Here again, the issue of authority is consent, only this time it is the consent of adults within schools to a structure which rewards those with experience, skill, knowledge, and predispositons to act that reflect the primacy of teaching and learning.

In the third domain, schools within school systems, the issue is whether schools that make serious progress toward engagement in teaching and learning will be allowed by their authorizing agencies to deviate from standard bureaucratic forms of organization and centrally-mandated routines. The current structure of school systems mainly rewards compliance with central directives and sometimes rewards performance on standard measures of achievement. It almost never explicitly rewards, but it often takes credit for, those rare instances where teachers and students create high, mutually-reinforcing expectations and meet them. Here the issue of authority is whether an essentially bureaucratic system is willing to tolerate the degree of variabilty and disorder necessary to create new forms of organization.

In the fourth domain, between school systems and their communities, the issue is whether the clients and constituents of public education, having absorbed the rhetoric of standards from the last generation of reform, will grant schools the discretion necessary to create forms of organization that foster engagement and commitment to learning. Advocates of the last generation of reforms may have done such a good job of convincing their clients and constitutents that school performance can be raised by setting higher external standards that they may have made it more difficult to focus attention on the prerequisites of engagement. Failing to focus on the prerequisites of engagement, for both teachers and students, however, will compound the problems of public schools in

the future, since the proportion of students for whom engagement in learning is most problematical will be increasing.

In summary, the problems facing public education cluster around one central theme: How to convert a system which has become preoccupied with external controls as a way of achieving its purposes into one which places responsibility for achieving its purposes with the key workers-- teachers and students-- and provides these workers with the skill, knowledge, and resources to get the job done. Schlechty and Joslin have suggested thinking of schools as places where knowledge and learning are produced and of students and teachers as "knowledge workers." [9] The value of this image of schools is that it shifts the focus of policy and organization from the external trappings of structure and control to the internal problems of skill, knowledge, and engagement.

Five Radical Proposals

If educators and policymakers were serious about the problems of the next generation of reform, as I have portrayed them, what might they do? I have five proposals, which I have labeled radical because they are sufficiently removed from established ways of doing business in public schools that they require extraordinary measures. I think, however, that they are feasible if two underlying conditions are met. First, they must be undertaken with support and endorsement of a strong working coalition of teachers, administrators, policymakers, and clients. Second, they must be given time to develop, but they should also be abandoned if they

don't result in student academic performance at least as good as schools operating in the convention structure.

In making these proposals, I have in mind that they could be undertaken in some form in any public school system, but I think it is most urgent to try them in settings with high proportions of "high-risk" students, since these are the setting that pose the greatest challenge to the next generation of reform. I also think that they could feasibly be undertaken by creating experimental subsystems in any large school system. In brief, my proposals are:

1. Dramatic reductions in the scale of schools.

The most powerful use of organizational structure to enhance engagement is simply to set the size of a school at the point at which every adult can be expected to know each student personally. My conversations with practitioners on this subject suggest that that size can be as large as 180-200 students, but probably no larger. The point is to create the basic unit of organization on the principle that expectations are mutually enforceable because everyone knows everyone else on a personal enough basis to invoke a common sense of obligation.

The principle, of course, would wreak havoc with the standard organizational form of schooling in virtually all urban and suburban school districts. It means breaking the correspondence between physical buildings and schools, so a given facility might have as many as eight or ten "schools." It also means dramatically stripping away the "middle management" that most school systems have inserted between the superintendent and the classroom teacher.

If you multiply the number of units in a system by, say, a factor of ten, you simply can't afford-- nor do you necessarily need-- to reproduce legions of middle management positions (assistant principals, counselors, curriculum specialists, etc.) for each unit. The point of creating smaller units is to make face-to-face contact, rather than bureaucratic routine or formal structure the medium of interaction, and to make it possible for teachers and students to set high expectations for learning, to make them mutually enforceable, and to find the means of meeting them.

2. Choice of the technology of instruction resides with the school.

Any technology of instruction which is feasible within existing district-wide per pupil expenditures should be permitted within a school. Peer tutoring, instructional aides, computers, commmunity volunteers, student teachers-- whatever kind of personnel can be mustered to increase contact between adults and students around agreed-upon expectations for learning should be fair game. The same principle should apply to instructional materials-- the expectations and objectives of teachers and students should drive the selection of instructional materials, not external requirements. Purchase of outside services should be gently regulated, but not prohibited, so that schools could decide to contract with other schools or with private vendors for instructional services if that would enhance the academic program. The point is that expectations and objectives should drive the choice of technology, and that educators and students should have

the flexibility within resources constraints to determine how they will reach those expectations.

The purpose of the bureaucratic superstructure of public education should be to negotiate expectations and objectives with schools as operating units and to set resource constraints for the system overall. Administrators above the school level should stay clear of decisions directly affecting instructional practice within schools, including deployment of personnel, materials, and use of instructional time.

3. Choice of interal organization resides with the school.

Any form of organization, and any allocation of responsibilities, which is feasible within district-wide per pupil expenditures should be permitted within a school. Schools should be required to have no standard roles, including the role of principal. It is reasonable to expect, however, that each school should have some one person designated to serve as the point of contact with central administration, but that person needn't be the same from one period to next. A governing committee would have to work out initial arrangements for organization in each school and the committee should have the authority to revise the structure. Some schools would presumably choose a leaner version of the standard model of principal and teachers; some schools might choose to operate as professional partnerships, with senior practitioners assuming the role of "managing partners;" [10] some schools might choose to hire a business manager who would report to a management committee. Initially, school governance committees should have

access to expert advice about the range of organizational options open to them. The point here, as with instructional technology, is to make the form of the organization serve the expectations and objectives of the key actors-- students and teachers-- rather than expecting all units to adhere to a standard form for the convenience of some bureaucratic order.

4. Choice of school by clients and educators.

Parents, students, and educators should be allowed to choose their school within reasonable constraints on capacity. Any group of educators that can mount an educational program meeting district-wide expectations for learning, constraints on unit cost, and peer review by other school-level educators should be allowed to start a school and should be allowed a grace period of two years to attract a sufficient number of students to meet minimum unit size and cost requirements. A major task of the central administration would be to organize and run a system of client and provider choice, matching parents', students', and teachers' perferences with available capacity in schools and using discretionary resources to encourage new ventures to form in response to anticipated demand. Parents and students should be offered the opportunity to change schools at least twice in an instructional year; teachers should be offered the opportunity at least once a year. The point here is make client and provider choice reinforce engagement in learning, rather than assuming that people assigned to a given niche in an organization by an impersonal system will form strong personal and professional bonds.

Creating a well-designed and run system of choice could be an extraordinarily interesting and egaging activity for central administrators. It would put central administrators in a position to influence instructional content by forming new ventures and orchestrating the movement of clients and personnel, rather than by applying rules and procedures.

5. Creation of policy "free zones."

Any school should have the authority to ask for a waiver of any policy requirement that it can demonstrate has an adverse effect on its ability to meet its negotiated expectations. The central administration and governing board of local districts should assume the role of evaluating and granting waiver requests and of negotiating with state agencies on behalf of schools for waivers of state and federal requirements. The point is to create a rebuttable presumption against external controls of instruction and organiztional structure within schools, and to force higher levels to justify policy and regulation in terms of its effects on the capacity of operating units in the organization to achieve their stated objectives. Another way of saying this is that the medium of exchange between schools and their authorizing agencies should be performance and not compliance. School-level educators should not be forced to operate in violation of policies that run counter to the enhancement of student engagement and learning. The burden of proof should be shifted to the point of origin for such policies. Higher level authorities should be forced to explain why a policy that adversely affects performance should not be waived.

Over time, this system should make higher level authorities more reluctant to promulgate system-wide policies and to rely instead on negotiated agreements and client pressure to achieve results. The system could also result, over time, in the creation of "free zones" through negotiation, in which whole sets of existing regulations are waived for specific settings on condition of performance.

These five proposals focus on the central problem of the next generation of educational reform: shifting the locus of responsibility and engagement from impersonal regulation and standards outside the school to the relationship between students and teachers inside the school. There may be other ways to achieve the same result. But I fear that not achieving that result will mean that public schools will lose their central role in educating citizens for democracy.

Footnotes

1. I have appropriated this title from Richard Edwards, Contested Terrain: The Transformation of the Workplace in the Twentieth Century (New York: Basic Books, 1979), because both the title and the content of that book represent an importtant text for understanding current issues of educational reform.

2. See, e.g., David Tyack, The One Best System; David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansor, Managers of Virtue; and Larry Cuban, How Teachers Taught.

3. See David Cohen, "Educational Technology, Policy, and Practice," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Vol.9, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 153-170; Larry Cuban, How Teachers Taught, op cit.; Richard Elmore, "Reform and the Culture of Authority in Schools," Educational Administration Quarterly, Vol. 23, no. 4 (November 1987), 60-78.

4. See, e.g., Harold Hodgkinson, All One System: Democgraphics of Education, Kindergarten through Graduate School (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership, 1985).

5. James Coleman, "Families and Schools," Educational Researcher, Vol. 16, no. 6 (August-September, 1987) 32-38; also, Henry M. Levin, Educational Reform for Disadvantaged Students: An Emerging Crisis (Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1986).

6. Arthur Powell, Eleanor Farrar, and David Cohen, The Shopping Mall High School (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986); Michael Sedlak, Christopher Wheeler, Diana Pullin, and Philip Cusick, Selling Students Short: Classroom Bargains and Academic Reform in the American High School (New York: Teachers College Press, 1986).

7. See Richard Elmore, "Leadership and Policy Edudation," draft paper prepared for the Center for Policy Research in Education, Michigan State University, February 1987.

8. See Richard Elmore, "Reform and the Culture of Authority in Schools," op cit.; and William K. Muir, "Teachers' Regulation of Classrooms," in David Kirp and Donald Jensen, eds., School Days, Rule Days: The Legalization and Regulation of Education (Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 1986), 109-123; Gerald Grant, "The Character of Education and the Education of Character," Kettering Review, Fall 1985,

9. Philip Schlechty and Anne Walker Joslin, "Images of Schools," Teachers College Record, Vol. 86, no. 1 (1981), 156-170.

10. See, e.g., Jay Lorsch and Peter Mathias, "When Professionals Have to Manage," Harvard Business Review, July-August, 1987, 78-83.